

Gendlin's 'Focusing' Method as an Aid to Holistic Christian Living

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Abstract

'Focusing' is a method developed by Eugene Gendlin that enables a person to listen to and dialogue with our internal, complex, bodily held wisdom. The opening out of the 'felt sense' can lead to a wider awareness and connection with the energies of Christian communities, liturgies and holy places, with the collective unconscious of societies, and the community of holy people and supernatural beings beyond time and space validating spiritual experiences of inter-relationality. It enables a person to draw on tacit, wide-ranging knowledge, more than can be consciously recalled and verbalised. The method is divided into stages. First an accepting, friendly space is cleared in the mind, laying other concerns to one side. Then attention is given to how the issue to be worked with is experienced and 'held' non-verbally in the body. Being open and at ease with this sort of experience can be a great confirming and deepening influence on faith, but also a radical challenge.

Introduction

In this paper I will be describing a technique which could be helpful to the current recovery of virtue ethics in Christian life, and revitalise awareness of living in connection with the cosmos and God, at many levels of being. This is the method of 'Focusing' - listening to and dialoguing with an internal, complex, bodily held wisdom, which was developed by Eugene Gendlin. I will first give an introduction to Gendlin's work, and briefly describe the Focusing method, and the 'felt sense' which is a key concept for practice. I will then consider

some characteristics of the virtue ethics tradition and contemporary spirituality which support the use of Focusing in spiritual practice. The third section will deal with ways the method is currently being used in this type of practice, to validate and explore spiritual experience and inter-relationality. In the final section I will be rather more speculative, discussing how this could be developed further and how the method can be used as a gateway to use of altered states of consciousness in a spiritual and ethical context.

Gendlin's Focusing Method

Eugene T Gendlin was a philosopher and psychotherapist, working at the University of Chicago from 1963–1995, and the founder of the Focusing Institute. Gendlin's early research asked: 'Why do some patients in therapy change and improve while others do not?' He found that the ones who would eventually be successful were from the outset using a type of intuitive, internal 'listening', to an initially fuzzy 'felt sense' of their issue, a bodily-held wisdom oriented to health and growth. The outcome of therapy could be predicted after two therapy sessions, regardless of the therapist's technique (Gendlin, 1982,3,4). Gendlin and co-workers were able to describe what these patients were doing and devise a method for teaching this technique, now known as Focusing (www.focusing.org/short_forms.htm). It has been researched and validated over many years since. According to Gendlin this inner act is probably quite unfamiliar to most people. It is not the therapeutic 'getting in touch with emotions', or conscious analytic thought, or the content-free quiet of meditation. Everyone has the internal equipment needed, but most people never use it. Some have learned to use it intuitively, but for most it takes some time and practice (Gendlin, 3-6). It can be done alone or with a Focusing partner or group, and with practice can become a habitual mode of awareness in everyday life. However it is almost totally unfamiliar to Western, rational-cognitive culture, and not valued or taught in mainstream approaches to education, mental wellbeing, or spirituality.

The felt sense, which is central to the process, is an intuitive, complex and holistic grasp of an issue, 'all about X', held in the body-mind. Gendlin helpfully gives two familiar everyday examples of it: the inner aura we have when particular people are brought to mind – a unique, semi-physically sensed, immediate response, quite separate from any rational thoughts or emotions we may have, which are generally more transient; and the unsettling sense of having forgotten to do something, an inner restlessness and preoccupation which is relieved when the cause is brought to consciousness (Gendlin, 33,38).

It seems likely this way of 'knowing' and 'remembering' with the felt sense is close to the mental processes of more intelligent animals, and may be on the border of unconscious and conscious for humans, usually operating subliminally, or as hypnogogic imagery, which has been linked with intuitive creative breakthrough (Field, 1996,16,17). It draws on tacit, wide-ranging knowledge, more than can be consciously recalled and verbalised. It is thus initially vague and inchoate to the conscious intellect, and clarifies and communicates itself only slowly and symbolically, with patient waiting.

The method is divided into stages. First an accepting, friendly space is cleared in the mind, laying other concerns to one side. Then attention is given to how the issue to be worked with is experienced and 'held' non-verbally in the body. Staying with this in an open, accepting, inquiring attitude, a 'felt sense' of it begins to develop, from what is usually initially diffuse and vague. Various descriptive words, symbols or short phrases are tried out until one resonates strongly with the feeling itself, in order to help it emerge and clarify. These can be of bodily sensations (for example, 'trembly', 'aching', 'tight throat'), emotional/bodily ('scared', 'excited', 'attracted'), a visual symbol, again often associated with the body, and so on. If the description successfully interacts with the felt sense, this results in a change of its quality ('felt shift'); for instance an internal sense of being 'heard', a bodily release of tension, and/or a slight change in the felt sense itself. In this way the felt meaning of the issue, held in the body-mind, develops and becomes available to the whole person, with increased freedom and energy. This welcoming attitude is especially needed when distressing and difficult feelings emerge. The Focuser is encouraged to remain as close to these as they can and they are often the source of the most profound insights and changes if allowed to tell their story and go through the felt shift movement. The Focuser can ask open questions of the felt sense, such as: Is it ok to be with this [issue] right now? What does this whole thing need? What's the worst/best about this issue? What's the next step? There will be a felt shift in response to the question, and the new felt sense arising can be recognised and dialogued with in turn. Focusing works well when the felt sense is treated almost as a sub-personality, such as a small child or animal, which needs to be approached respectfully and gently for trust and communication to develop. It has its own insights and perspective which it can only share if the conscious mind is open and patient, and does not attempt to dominate the exchange. More experienced users, who have learnt the skill of 'letting go' and allowing this spontaneous process to happen, often combine the

stages, with inquiries, insights and shifts in quick succession, in a fluid conversation with the felt sense.

The process results in a gradual exploration and generation of insights as to how the issue is perceived at this deep level ('felt meaning'), and a release of energy, which may previously have been locked into defences of old hurts and issues. This *process* of felt shift always feels good, even if the *content* is difficult or painful, and that the body-mind instinctively knows how to direct the process towards healing. Information and insight gained may be useful in making life choices but also more importantly the release of energy held in the body-mind means the person changes and can 'carry' the issue differently even if outer circumstances cannot be altered. The insights which emerge may often be surprising or illogical to the conscious mind; however these words or images from any one stage are less important and reliable than the overall client-led direction of change and growth (Gendlin, 8,102,39-40,59,68,77,159).

Virtue and Practical Wisdom

In Christian ethical theory, there has been a recent move from rule-based systems emphasising obligations and duties. These tend to employ universal codes, offer reasoned clarity and certainty in moral dilemmas, and have a consequent minimalist approach to morality. A more postmodern approach is that of virtue ethics, derived from ancient and medieval philosophers such as Aristotle and Aquinas, and developed by thinkers such as Alastair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas, among others. This returns to the existential basis of morality: the question of what a genuinely good life should be like, what human 'being' really is, in its fullness and richness. It emphasises becoming one's true self by choosing the goods one really desires at a deep level (one undistorted by the illusions and false desires of sin), and ultimately, choosing God as the ultimate Good. Virtue in this system is not behaving according to external standards by exercising willpower and self control, but having the qualities (disposition) needed to live a life of fulfilment and excellence as a contributor to one's society. Herbert McCabe sees growth in the virtues as gradually widening one's range of skills, capabilities, concerns and relationships; moving from personal and passive satisfactions to interpersonal, communal and also supernatural/metaphysical engagement. He describes these latter as the 'politics of mankind', and 'the politics of the Bible' respectively, using politics in the broad sense of the activity of a citizen of a *polis*, city-community, for the benefit of all (McCabe, 2005,48-63). John Heron describes a similar spirituality of 'cosmic citizenship': holistic, embodied, and

related to the rest of the natural and supernatural life of the cosmos through a deep, mutually beneficial, interior connectedness (Heron, 1998, 122). This type of ethics raises various questions: how the values underpinning such activities are chosen; how one can be authentic in contacting and discerning one's desire for good; how to negotiate among the conflicts and tensions (both internal and external) of various drives and values; and how to build a community with shared values at this deep level (rather than relying on conformity to rules). The key virtue which addresses these concerns is *phronesis*, practical wisdom or prudence, which governs the appropriate use of the other virtues in a particular context. According to McCabe this practical intelligence helps the individual both to know how to live well, and to interpret their environment: 'It involves a sensual involvement with the world and is the fruit of considerable sense-experience.' The local situation, and the background of a particular person's life experience give particular premises for this practical reasoning 'which cannot... be grasped by intellect alone; for intellect deals through meaningful signs such as words, and an individual thing can never be the meaning of a word. The mind, for Aquinas, can only cope with the material individual [person] by reflection on, and insight into, the way in which this human animal acquired its repertoire of meanings through its sensual experience... as organised by the 'interior senses'... which are a bodily affair. So the virtue that is developed in the practical reason demands more than abstract understanding; practical wisdom is developed not just by reading, talking or arguing but by imagination, imagery and stories, by experience; it demands bodily sensitivity to the world around us.' He considers that humans interpret the world at two levels. In common with animals, we derive meaning via the senses, from our holistic embodied existence as organisms in an environment, and act accordingly (for example sensing food or another animal nearby, and behaving appropriately). In addition as linguistic animals we are able to derive higher level meanings, by dealing with abstract information and concepts (McCabe, 79-83,62,94). Virtue-based living uses both sources of meaning, while other ethical systems privilege the second, more intellectual one, following a Cartesian dualism which attempts to make the mind the master of the body. An education and formation in the virtue tradition is inductive not deductive; not the instilling of formal principles and standards, but 'catching' a feel for the way things are done in a particular community, a shared sensitivity for what is important and desirable in practice; and, I think, a subtle connection (perhaps through the collective unconscious?) whereby one can directly feel, incorporate internally, and contribute to these shared concerns, and the movement of the spirit in the community.

Focusing is a technique that is well suited to support this spirituality and ethics. It helps the individual to consult their holistic, embodied, deeply connected and complex sense of a situation, and allows the meaning and the appropriate next step to emerge intuitively, when this is processed in correlation with more conscious linguistic and symbolic resources. The 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of an issue is experienced directly, as a unique individual, and the process heals, integrates and resolves internal conflict and frees up energy for authentic living (practice of the virtues). It can help to clarify the drives and blockages to ethical motivation and action, and change the disposition. Ellis gives a detailed explanation of this process in terms of both moral philosophy and the underlying neurophysiology (Ellis, 2005, 14-157). It can also enhance prayer and interpersonal and communal relationality. These will be considered in the next two sections.

Characteristics of Contemporary Spirituality

Lawrence Freeman writes of prayer which goes beyond the thinking intellect: "Because it is a subtle issue, it benefits from a sensual and bodily approach. That way we don't get lost in ideas, but the ideas can become charges that jump from the processing mind, down the cerebral cortex, and wish around the neurological system with the thrill of understanding and a sense of breakthrough as a truth felt " (Freeman, 2011). This captures the excitement and energising effect of the best of contemporary spirituality. It involves the whole human person, drawing them to live fully as embodied beings with a capacity for transcendence, by mindful and reverent attention to their own experience. This experiential spirituality necessarily has an adult relationship to doctrinal formulations, methods and systems of spiritual growth etc. It is person-centred, and respects their ability to dialogue with and incorporate such resources as needed. It has learnt from the wisdom of apophatic theology that the human-divine relationship has depths of mystery that cannot be adequately contained in words: "One of the difficulties in articulating spiritual meanings and processes is that we are analysing things that are highly personal, subjective, emotional and dynamic, meaning that it is possible that by putting these concepts into words, we will miss out on what we seek most... we may unintentionally restrict or truncate the experience " (Fukuyama, Sevig, 1999, xiii-xiv).

It draws on the insights of depth psychology. Ulanov argues that theology and church life are impoverished and deadened when they leave out the psyche's experience of God, the "deep rich life of the unconscious " which should be welcomed as a source of grace,

motivation and stimulation to a developing Christian life (Ulanov, 2000 118-119). Consequently this spirituality is at ease with unconscious as well as conscious process, helping the ego to integrate these with each other and traditional resources. It aims to put the 'house of the soul' at rest and in order, so that the delicate substantial touches of God can be felt intuitively, and responded to freely (Dent, 1993,12-13). It leads further, beyond the individual psyche, to insight and alignment with God's working in creation at interpersonal and transcendent levels. It moves beyond doctrinal assent, reason and conscious control, to faith as learning to trust and let go into God as a living reality, in the depths of one's being and in the workings of the cosmos.

Focusing in Current Spirituality

The basic Focusing method can easily be adapted for work within spirituality, by using it within the Christian context of the relationships of the person with God and others, and using religious resources as appropriate to this growth and exploration process. This has been developed in the 'Bio-spirituality' approach of Ed McMahon and Peter Campbell, which sees the movement of the felt sense towards growth and wholeness as an immediate, felt awareness of the working and touch of grace in the body-mind. They consider work at this level of being, connecting people with themselves, others and the world, as becoming the Body of the cosmic Christ, and becoming aware of the movement of the immanent Spirit towards life in God (McMahon, 1993,190,84). Various meditative techniques can foster a holistic balance between body, mind and spirit, but at least initially these tend to concentrate awareness on one or other of these faculties. Focusing is unusual in that it works with all three from the beginning in a closely integrated way, combining contemplative and active aspects, as a sort of *via media*. As McMahon says: 'Focusing is about community building - inside ourselves and around us... [it] builds toward group and global community out of our personal wholeness... a spirituality of the body's movement towards "holiness"' (McMahon, 13). This unifying process is the foundation of inner peace, genuine community and ecological caring.

The initial step of 'clearing a space' is a process similar to centring or mindfulness and can be used as a preparation for prayer (Leijssen, 2007,255-270). For some people it can give at least a foretaste of being free from current pain and preoccupations, a sense of being in touch with a wider spiritual realm, which can begin to reorient them to this hope and promise (Campbell, McMahon,1985,34). Similarly, using the Focusing question 'What does this whole thing need?' can help to

reframe or transcend one's immediate concerns and become aware of a wider reality, as in this example: "A 40-year-old female client, who attended church regularly, had struggled with abandonment issues in previous sessions. Because she was in the hospital for an operation, I did a [Focusing based] counselling session by telephone. In addition to feeling physical pain, she was in turmoil because she felt that her husband had abandoned her emotionally. I asked her how she felt inside. The client felt angry, sad, tired, and "wrecked". After exploring the meaning of each feeling, I asked her "What does this whole thing need?" She received an image of something in her stomach cradling the part that had been operated on. She felt an energy in the form of a guardian angel holding the "injured image". In her image, a path connected her to a broad horizon. With marked relief (at the time of her felt shift) she said, "I don't feel so alone any more". She reported that this was the first time she had experienced her spirituality, even though she attended church regularly. She felt light, and the pain was gone. The client said that she realized that this spiritual part could nurture her emotionally even when her husband could not do so (Hinterkopf, 1994,3).

Simply using this rather counter-cultural method is *itself* a way of giving space and gentle tacit permission to experience something different, which may be enough for people to move beyond their habitual mindset and expand and reinvigorate their spiritual senses. Campbell & MacMahon suggest looking at the felt meaning behind key words in Christian revelation, to become aware of one's current responses and develop personal images and associations (Campbell, MacMahon, 8). Leijssen recommends checking if the words used in prayer and spiritual direction match their bodily felt sense, deepening this integration in a natural and fluid way (Leijssen, 2007). Ulanov similarly recommends that while working with communications from the unconscious such as the felt sense, we can hold them in dialogue with traditional resources and symbols of faith, and let them play with and inform each other (Ulanov, 120-121). It may be that due to earlier difficult experiences, the felt meaning of religious concepts is negative. In the Focusing method the felt sense is approached almost as a sub-personality, in a gentle, respectful and friendly manner, allowing time to establish trust and communication, and respecting its wisdom and choice as to how to proceed. Campbell & MacMahon add a negotiating step once the felt sense is contacted, asking "Is it OK to be with this [sense/issue] right now?" Hence the route is flexible: if a felt sense of reluctance or difficulty emerges, this can be dialogued with instead, providing a gentle roundabout way to work with resistance and blockages (Campbell,

McMahon, 36). This “working with our solid blocks of [resistance], trying to loosen them and trace down their origins, opens channels in us to receive... grace” (Ulanov, 132).

Campbell & MacMahon note the method actively *disposes* us to hear from the Spirit - but the key action is *letting go* of reason and control at the appropriate point and waiting the unfolding of the process as a gift of grace. This is a common dynamic of meditative practices, moving from active preparation to passive receptivity in order to bring about change, and a reflection of the paschal cycle of dying and resurrection to new life. Campbell tells an amusing anecdote of becoming lost while riding in a desert: he eventually realises his only solution is to let go of the reins and wait for the horse to take him home. His point is that our own inner ‘horse-sense’ can be a sure guide if left to use its natural God-given ability (Campbell, McMahon, 21-22,47-48,60-65). Further, the *overall* direction of the process can be correlated with conventional religious resources and norms, and described using these concepts and language, helping to orientate the person in their tradition, and use its wisdom (Hinterkopf, 1994). Their own evaluation of their spiritual and psychological wellbeing comes from the process cues of an easing and energising in the felt sense, and an overall move towards transcendence (Hinterkopf, 1994). However theoretical questions about the Christian integrity of the method have been raised by Sears (Campbell, McMahon, viii): how does focusing relate to core Christian beliefs, for instance the nature and roles of the Trinity; and can the movements and insights experienced in Focusing be fully trusted, or discerned? Also, if used in an unbalanced way it could come close to illuminism, or become somewhat narcissistic if not integrated with community and church life. The strategies of reflection and correlation mentioned here partially address such concerns, and an experiential approach will naturally encounter God in the messy unfolding of a particular life rather than through the clearer concepts of systematic theology; this is the price of getting real about faith and spirituality.

A development of Focusing by Sondra Perl to aid writers could be adapted to help the Focuser discern the shape and movement of their life, by considering this as the ‘text’ being composed. After rational consideration of options, questions such as: What is the sense of the whole (life or particular area), What draws my attention, What’s interesting about this, What is missing, What is the burning issue or focus, Where do I need to go with this, Am I still going where I want to go, etc, can be put to the felt sense. Intuitive answers then emerge from usually fuzzy and unclear initial perceptions. McMahon calls this

'the body-wisdom that [can evaluate] what we come to in our rational thought processes' (McMahon, 69). This draws on the holistic, wider bodily-held knowledge of one's unique, unfolding path to holiness. Gendlin describes this: "The body is an incredibly fine system within nature and the cosmos. Its *holistic* sensing of what is prolife and what is not indicates much more than a thought or an emotion can. If we wish to [change] something, we must sense how that can fit into what the body senses already - its own values" (Gendlin, 76).

In a way common to most psychotherapeutic approaches the ego is encouraged to be a gatekeeper or facilitator of the process, managing and correlating inputs from the other parts of the psyche, in particular the felt sense which taps into the unconscious/'inner child', and conventional religious input which may be held by the superego/'parent'. Thus the process can be a way of forming an authentic personal conscience and a more whole personality working in harmony with itself and others. This can be helpful to relate and integrate 'head knowledge' of doctrines, norms and ethical considerations with deeper personal motivations and character structures. Such norms will only take one so far. Many decisions are too subtle for these intellectual considerations to be much help, the choice is often between good or neutral things, hampered by internal lack of freedom, or just too complex to assess completely. The felt sense however is able to hold such complex and many-layered issues in a holistic way present this tacit knowing through symbols the conscious mind can relate to, and engage in a process of dialogue and negotiation as to the best path towards wellbeing and wholeness. Finding this deeper wisdom and energy for growth can be literally a God-send, a source of guidance, vitality and growth into wholeness and freedom. In terms of virtue ethics, this becomes sensing at the level of true desire, for wholeness and living in harmony with God's energies (*theosis*). It moves from external, code-based ethical behaviour, which leaves the self divided and conflicted and the will struggling to bridge the gap between demands and desires, towards virtue - living fully and holistically, fulfilling one's unique potential, and trusting in one's innate God-given potential to develop into one's true self.

Finally, the method can be used to support the contemporary re-emphasis of relational and social concerns in spirituality, going beyond personal piety. According to Leijssen experiencing felt meaning as an inner guide "can open an extraordinary doorway into the realm of spiritual awareness - an inexhaustible source of energy for oneself and the world... increased self-confidence and confidence in the mystery of life" (Leijssen, 2007). I will suggest below some ways the method could be developed further to inform and support such work.

Further Potential for Development

The possibilities discussed briefly below are not new ideas, only perhaps a contemporary expression of ways the Spirit has always worked with receptive people. However those involved with guidance and formation in this spirituality need at least some common experiential knowledge of the phenomena in order to communicate, because it involves trying to describe something for which words do not exist (not because the experience is ineffable, but because as a culture we have not yet become familiar with the experiences and have no language to describe or contain them) (Ferguson in Gendlin, vii-ix); and perhaps a deep connection on the level of felt sense, which can be a more useful and immediate means of guidance and support. It respects the autonomy of the individual's process, accompanying rather than prescribing a path, creating the receptive and open attitude which invites the felt sense to communicate. Such guidance thus comes closer to an apprenticeship model (such as the Desert Fathers and Orthodox tradition), or the Buddhist concept of direct transmission, a communication of a way of being, rather than transfer of information. Sears describes this dynamic: "our bodily existence is already being transformed through the Spirit of Jesus' resurrection, and the believer can touch this Spirit at the depth of inner experience and in the bond of love uniting believers" (In Campbell, McMahan., ix). Personally I have found monitoring my felt sense increases my sensitivity to unspoken issues ('antennae'), for example in group and pastoral work, picking up sensations and "little surprises flitting by on the edge of consciousness" (Campbell, McMahan, 32). These can be gently held in awareness and/or given an opening in the spoken dialogue, and if voiced can be useful to aid discernment and *metanoia* (Dent, 77). This may be similar to the phenomenon of 'reading of hearts'. Similarly, Fukuyama & Sevig consider it helpful for spiritual counsellors to work with several levels of their being simultaneously in order to engage at the level of 'true self' and not just conventional roles/personalities, and thus gain clearer insights into the work being done (Fukuyama, Sevig, 143).

Campbell & MacMahon talk of Focusing leading to an unfolding awareness of connectedness and unity with creation, having the nature of resonance rather than intellectual knowledge (Campbell, McMahan, 2-3,30). Gendlin's primary use is to facilitate a therapeutic process, however with sufficient competence and readiness personal issues could be left in the background and a felt sense of other issues contacted, which opens out a different area of application for spiritual work. He describes this wider perspective: "When I use the word 'body' I mean much more than the physical machine. Not only do

you physically live the circumstances around you, but also those you only *think* of in your mind. Your physically felt body is in fact part of a gigantic system of here and other places, now and other times, you and other people – in fact, the whole universe. This sense of being bodily alive in a vast system is the body as it is felt from inside” Gendlin, 77). McMahan calls this “a story hidden in the marrow of your bones... that plunges your self-awareness deep into a Presence and Power of Life in your body that you will instinctively recognise as sacred” (McMahan, 84). Sheldrake and others discuss many aspects of this phenomenon of deep interconnectedness which is increasingly accepted by many diverse disciplines (Sheldrake, 2003). Religious and spiritual disciplines have long held that activities such as intercessory prayer, healing and experiences out of normal space-time can have validity in physical reality, although this cannot be explained by the conventional scientific worldview.

Exploring the felt sense of God can lead to a prayer of adoration, sensing some of his revealed movements and qualities, which may in turn lead into an infused prayer seeming to be caught up within the flow of God’s energy and concern (McMahan, 87). Sometimes prayer may be simply ‘sunbathing’ in the felt presence of God, or holding a particular hurting area, or a felt sense of situations or other people in need, before God in prayer and healing, in gentle non-invasive intercession. Charismatic churches recognise a gift of ‘having a heart for prayer’ for a particular situation, a sort of inner burning compelling to prayer until an inner assurance (felt shift?) of God’s response is experienced. This type of intercession may establish a direct connection at the level of the collective unconscious, and free and heal others in the same way that Focusing works with the individual psyche.

The opening out of the felt sense can lead to a wider awareness and connection with the energies of Christian communities, liturgies and holy places, with the collective unconscious of societies, and the community of holy people and supernatural beings beyond time and space. Worship, healing/woundedness and community can be experienced at the level of felt sense and its images. Being open and at ease with this sort of experience can be a great confirming and deepening influence on faith, but also a radical challenge. McMahan writes of the emptiness, psychological isolation and formality of much liturgical celebration, which when explored with the felt sense can be extremely painful, but can unfold into a deep longing and aptitude for presence to each other and God, with potential for “a depth and breadth of Eucharistic faith and community never before known in Christianity” (McMahan, 101). The felt sense can also open into a numinous sense

of dealing with beings that are 'other': immediate, connected, but not under our control or initiative, and sometimes of a power and scope way beyond our own capability. One example is the characteristic presence of angels, as glorious and powerful helpers, always available but in no way 'domesticated'. While this may be disturbing to modern rationality, Christian and other traditions through the ages have seen such interactions as part of God's purpose for human beings. On the other hand, in my experience the interference of evil spirits in interpersonal work usually causes an unexpected and sudden oppression of the felt sense, often associated with an irrational and intractable degeneration of dialogue and/or emotions of the people involved, and consequent derailment of the work. I knew a pastor working towards reconciliation in Northern Ireland who had similar experiences, being able to sense the change before anything outward happened. CS Lewis's fictional description of such an attack on the thoughts and emotions is a vivid illustration (Lewis, 1953,5-11). This work needs groundedness, strong roots in a living faith tradition and sacramental life, and a healthy stable ego: it should not be undertaken lightly.

However this raises an ethical question. Private prayer for others is accepted in the Christian tradition with or without the other's consent, but does this become a grey area if the other's mental, physical, emotional or even spiritual state is being affected directly by the will of the pray-er? Similarly, various paranormal abilities which can occur with such states (example: clairvoyance, telepathy, ability to be present outside of the normal space/time limits) are morally neutral in themselves, and can be used or abused according to the ethical orientation and wisdom of the practitioner. It is likely that these phenomena may be occurring, but will not be discussed openly, due to fear of misunderstanding or being labelled 'mad', although the taboo on admitting to such experiences in Western culture is gradually lifting (Hay, 2006,8-11). Even within charismatic Christianity such gifts are generally expected to fall into narrow preconceived 'biblical' patterns, and anything outside these criteria is rejected by default. Consequently the likelihood of finding informed and accepting training, supervision or church community is rather slim, and this whole area is left potentially ethically vulnerable. As with any pioneer territory there are risks, but also much freedom, opportunity, and potential benefits for the whole Church and the wider community.

Conclusion

The Christian tradition has always recognised that God the Trinity is present to us, and all creation, in many ways. The overall task of

Christian life is to become aware of these and respond to these graces as fully as is possible for our human nature, glorifying and praising God through what we become and do. However this task is seriously hampered by many contemporary cultural attitudes and assumptions, which lock people into limited ways of knowing, believing and responding. The Focusing method used within spirituality could be one gateway to explore and recover this greater human potential for co-operation with the divine, and give it recognition and support in our cultural environment. The method is well researched and teachable, in harmony with many concerns and aims of contemporary spirituality, and could be of value to people open to this approach within the Christian tradition.

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